

MARCH 4, 1982

The best medicine for the gloomy sheep and cow market has fallen in the Shortgrass Country. Mertzson has had close to 4 inches of rain in the past week. At the ranch, we've measured a little over an inch. Southward toward Del Rio, our shearing captain claims that he has had several appointments cancelled because of rain.

Two of the young guys I work with got so carried away by the rainy spell that they used the weather as an excuse to go into San Angelo for a hair cut. I sure can't deny that they didn't need a trim. The Christmas holidays had disrupted everything but their dancing schedule so bad that their hair styling had been badly neglected.

So for this one time, I was in favor of the haircuts. Our country has a fair sprinkling of thorny brush, like lote and catclaw. Scraggy beards or untrimmed locks are dangerous to hombres that tear around horseback. I'm not saying that they are dumb enough to deliberately poke their head in a bush, but as you probably know, mounted men don't always choose their landing spots.

Too, in the winter months, coon and possum hunting have a big attraction to these fellows. As excited as they both become over the price of coon hides, it wouldn't surprise anyone around the ranch to have to cut one of them from a fence line, or dig him out of a tight hole under a bluff. Their long hair sure wouldn't help the man on the shovel or wielding the knife.

When cowboys stopped wearing hats in favor of caps, they lost a protective device. Wide hat brims had the same purpose as whiskers do on a tomcat. Many an old boy would have ended up chinned on a low wire or knocked off in the brush if his hat hadn't veered him off pattern. Bronc tuners don't use oxbow stirrups as an afterthought, and the same is true about the other things that were given cowhands without them having to think too much about the matter.

I sure don't want to make any of this offensive to my colleagues, but I suspect all of us passed through a stage when we had more courage than judgment. If you'll think back about those days, it was always some wild old kid that came in behind the drive, bareheaded, with his rope coils hanging to his horse's knees, not an older hand. After the whiskers start turning grey, horse races and cow chases slow down. The only reason a man loses his hat from then on is because of the wind.

The boys did make it back to the ranch with a different story. Instead of going to a licensed shop, they'd patronized a barber college. I was fascinated by their choice. I've always wanted to meet the dean of the barber college in San Angelo. Not to learn how he taught his students to cut hair, but how he conditioned their tongues and voice-boxes.

Throughout the years, I'd listened to many of his graduates preside over the chair of humanities and table the specific faults of our government. Monologues that often exceeded the grandest moments of the great filibusters in Congress. Strong-winded speeches that forced the customers to use sign language and made a shop a real treat for a lonely cowboy that had spent weeks on the rangeland far from human voices.

However, these cowboys hadn't met the dean. I think from the looks of their eyes they must have made the late class at the school. But at least their hair was cut short enough to last another four months.

Many times I've thought of buying a barber's chair for the ranch. The payout would be slow. Nevertheless, time off in town would go faster. But it's all right for them to have a little fun. Sometimes when I've got the space, I'll tell you how great haircuts were when I was young.